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ABSTRACT

Group seminars, or small discussion groups, support cooperative reflection between teachers, expose interns to new perspectives, help them develop professional relationships, and allow time for them to expand and deepen their reflective analysis of everyday occurrences. A group of 15 student teachers in an early childhood program at one university attended bi-weekly group seminars during the student teaching semester. The interns themselves suggested topics for discussion at most of the sessions. The group shared their impressions of teaching, discussed elements of instruction, analyzed classroom management approaches, assessed progress toward knowledge-based competencies and standards, and developed and shared their professional portfolios. Four primary topics emerged from these discussions: discipline and classroom management, pedagogy, conflicts between pedagogy and practice, and employment. On the semester's final evaluation form, few students ranked the seminars as the most valuable requirement during student teaching, but most students valued the guest speakers who were experts in the field and appreciated the chance to vent, communicate, and share with other student teachers. They also valued the support and flexibility of the supervisor. Contains 21 references.) (SM)

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Group seminars: Dialogues to enhance professional development and reflection

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Group seminars: Dialogues to Enhance Professional Development and Reflection

Introduction

The importance of preparing students to be thoughtful, reflective teachers and learners is accepted as a primary theoretical aim in today's innovative teacher preparation programs. Students' construction of teacher knowledge is emphasized through experiences that include planning, teaching, discussing, and reflecting. Particular practices and specific strategies such as journals (Calderhead, 1991; Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993: Surbeck, Han & Moyer, 1991; Zeichner, 1983; Wiltz, 1999), reflective interviews (Trumball & Slack, 1991), peer conferences (Zeichner & Liston, 1985), mid-term and final conferences (Killen, 1989; Livingston & Borko, 1989), and video taping (Bryan, 1999), help teacher educators promote reflective teaching as an integral part of the student teaching and professional development process. Field experiences, in particular, provide prospective teachers with "opportunities for reflection on their teaching . . . " (Darling-Hammond & Cobb, 1996, p. 45).

Seminars as Dialogic Reflection

One way to begin to examine teaching in more depth is to focus on what teachers talk about. Dialogic reflection allows teachers to interact with each other and to mutually relate to each others' beliefs, thereby clarifying ones own understandings and perspectives (Ayers, 1993; Schubert & Ayers, 1992; Valli, 1992; van Manen, 1990; Witherell & Noddings, 1991; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Furthermore, as questions are raised about the nature of professional interactions, student teachers come to understand and improve their practice through sharing, revealing and discussing values that are either explicit or implicit in their practice (Rudney & Guillaume, 1990; Webb, 1999). Reflection as a process, is both individual and collaborative. Group seminars, or small discussion groups, support cooperative reflection between peers, expose interns to new perspectives, assist them in developing professional relationships, and allow time for them to expand and deepen their reflective analysis of every day occurrences.

Seminars in One Training Program

Fifteen student teachers (13 women; 2 men) in an early childhood education training program at a major Mid Atlantic university attended seminars that were held every other week during the student teaching semester. Most of the seminars were held after school on the University campus. The same supervisor who observed the students in the field scheduled and facilitated the seminars, but the interns themselves suggested topics for discussion at most of the sessions. This group worked closely with each other, shared their impressions of the teaching experience, discussed elements of instruction, analyzed classroom management approaches, assessed progress toward knowledge-base competencies and INTASC standards, and developed and shared their professional portfolios. Collectively, seminars became places where critical dimensions of teaching were raised and reviewed, and where goals, values and assumptions that guided student work were clarified, modified and refined. Seminars provided a forum for question-asking where one could sustain doubt, avoid quick judgments, discuss issues of concern, and solicit ideas or solutions to problems. Seminars offered a safe, informal environment where debriefing of the clinical experience could occur and where students' personal and professional growth was fostered.

Four primary topics emerged from these group discussions: (1) Discipline and classroom management, (2) Pedagogy (3) Conflicts between pedagogy and practice, and (4) Employment.

Discipline and Classroom Management

As the semester began, students' major concerns centered on discipline and classroom management. Student journal entries, like their conversations during seminars, reflected an honest, appraisal of what was going on in their classrooms.

> Randolph: One of my bigger concerns surrounds the matter of classroom discipline. Some students are very slow to follow instruction . . . . I was thinking about arranging the students into working groups. Perhaps arranging them in teams with key assignments would curb some of the milling about.

> Peter: A small fraction of the class stayed on task and I was able to complete the individual exercises at closure. Student behavior ranged from being bored to off-task conversations and horseplay.

Jennifer: This week has been so hectic. Not only was I having a problem because the kids didn't feel like making weather books, but the kids at the other centers were running around. It was definitely disorganized.

Anna: While I was teaching this lesson, there were many students who were not paying attention. This is when I started being tough with the students. I realized that I need to be very firm with them if I want them to take me seriously.

Dee: If I can meet the individual needs of these students, then I will be able to have a classroom that is primarily on task.

Pedagogy and Practice

As time went on, and management issues became less worrisome, students tended to discuss topics concerning pedagogy, practice, and understanding more about how children learn. Much journal writing and many seminar discussions centered around the planning of and execution of lessons, successes and the failures, and solutions to the problems that resulted.

Ally: I have no clue how to teach second grade children mathematics and reading. I hope Ms. G. tells me -- guides me through the processes and procedures. I don't know how to teach academically, even though I spent four years learning. I think I want to be a pre-school teacher.

Randolph: Working with the children on word work and reading calls my attention to the need to carefully attend to pronunciations. This is most critical because of the letter-sound relationship in teaching words using phonemic awareness. Culturally learned (dialect) pronunciations provide miscues that hamper instruction.

Deanna: I tried an activity . . . that failed miserably. I wanted to introduce the concept of fractions of a set, instead of fractions of a whole. I tried using M&Ms to divide between friends, but it only worked in the division aspect. The children couldn't understand that if you had 8 M&Ms, and shared equally, you each had 1/2 of the M&Ms. . . .On the way home I thought of a paper folding activity to try. We will each have one sheet of paper, which we will fold. Then we will shade 1/2 of the paper. If we fold it into fourths, will the amount shaded change? Even if we have two shaded pieces? How can that be? We will then put the M & Ms on the shaded paper to show that 4 M&Ms out of 8 are still equal to 1/2.
[The next day] It worked! Most of the kids got it. Some even got equivalent fractions!

Joan: I am beginning to get a handle on how some of the children in my class learn. Annie, for example, cannot succeed without first building up her self-esteem. She has great ideas but cannot complete a task without socializing. Mark S. needs to feel special. I am seeing that if I give him an extra bonus, he will work harder to finish the first task. If left alone, he has a way of finding trouble. He is remarkably bright with impulse control issues. I have a feeling that he will be the most challenging.

Conflicts Between Pedagogy and Practice

Another common topic revolved around the tensions that exist between the student teacher and the mentor teacher, between students and student teachers, between student teachers and the "system", and between what students have been taught at the university and what they actually see in use in the field. "Recognizing tensions in one's thinking about teaching and learning is the first step in learning from experience" (Bryan, 1999, p. 14). When changes in practice result from the recognition and the dialogue about tensions, students often move to a new level of understanding.

> Betty: Sometimes I just don't understand. They were busy and creatively playing with play dough, turtles, cats, stones and "water" all at the same table. She added popsicle sticks and told the kids they could make bridges. So Joe decided he wanted lizards in his pond, too. He asked me and I had seen Mrs. A. allow and introduce various materials, so I said that would be a great idea and told him to go ahead. Well, Mrs. A. saw this and stopped him saying, "We're playing with turtles, not lizards today." Where did that come from? Like I've said before, she likes things the way she likes them, but there's no rhyme or reason to it, which leaves me feeling even more insecure and frustrated around her.
>
> Anna: I feel much more comfortable in this classroom today. But the dittos. I just can't stand them.
>
> Terry: The county controls the curriculum so what is my role in the curriculum? Do I facilitate the children's learning based on what I am told, or do I find clever ways to teach the objectives without following every instruction or lesson in the science kit? I know that the lesson [swirling colors] could have been more meaningful to the children. The children could have devised their own means of exploration. Time is a major factor though.
>
> Dena: My final concern is actually for the spirit of another child. Brent is quite intelligent. He calls out when he's not raising his hand though. I can see the need for order, but sometimes his ideas are so terrific that you really want to discuss them. Mrs. G. [cooperating teacher] has already had Brent in time out once. . . . I really can see both sides of the coin. I think that I would be less strict if the answers were as appropriate as Brent's. But consistency is necessary to maintain established order. How can a child stay within the rules if I change them to suit me? I believe that his ideas may help other children who are struggling.
>
> In my own classroom, Brent's notion of a chair being a 4 would have been explored but I felt that I could not relinquish control in [my cooperating teacher's] classroom. Conversely, I realize that I will have to meet all of the objectives mandated for the children so I will have to impose some kind of authority in my own room. It's a tight rope that teachers walk!

Employment

Finally, as the semester drew to completion, student teachers' focus shifted to interviewing and getting a job.

Annette: I went to my first interview today. I can't tell you how nervous I was. I do think I did a lot better than I thought I would. Because of your feedback and the feedback from other experienced teachers, I have become a lot more confident with the things that I do. I know that I still have a lot to learn. I know that I will never stop learning. My goal is just to be the best that I can be for my children.

Teresa: The more and more I plan the more I get away from that type of thinking. Sometimes I know that I just need to wait to see how the lessons are going to go. It's definitely an ongoing learning process, which is terrific. Change can make big improvements. I got an open contract today! It is a wonderful feeling to know I have picked a career that I know was meant for me.

Amy: I am confident my two-week take over will go well. I start Friday. I got two jobs in New Jersey. One at a preschool, teaching kindergarten and one at a public school, teaching I don't know what grade.

Dena: I am now the newest member of Captain John Smith Elementary! I had an interview this morning. At the end of the interview, the principal asked if I wanted to see my new classroom! It's only a part time position but I'm getting a contract and benefits. Also I will go from part to full-time in September. Yeah! I'm in the system! I'm a teacher!

Student's Reactions

On the semester's final evaluation form, few students ranked seminars as the "most valuable" requirement during student teaching, but even students who ranked seminars as being the "least valuable" in helping them to become more competent, reflective practitioners, valued guest speakers who were experts in their field, and appreciated the chance to vent, to communicate with their supervisor, and, most of all, to share their experiences with other student teachers who were in different settings. Students also valued the support and the flexibility of their supervisor. The informality of the seminar structure provided opportunities to examine both personal and professional issues.

While journals provided another method of self-evaluation, seminars allowed students the time to talk about issues without writing them down. All enjoyed hearing about the problems, successes and failures that other student teachers were having. Breaking into small "chat groups" facilitated group sharing, collaborative reflection, community building, and professional development growth. The strong peer relationships that developed over the 16-week period were

especially valuable in encouraging reflective practice among peers and in establishing a support system for professional development.

Conclusion

Student teachers involved in this teacher education program benefited from their participation in reflective activities. They learned that teaching is a demanding, complex process, and that learning to teach is a continuous process requiring interpretations from multiple points of views (Roskos, Risko & Vukelich, 1998). Seminars, in particular, provided structured sharing times where student teachers were given opportunities to talk, to listen and to respond to issues of concern regarding the education of young children. "Seminar time devoted to reflective sharing is another means of encouraging reflection and exposing students to concerns that are on deeper levels" (Rudney & Guillaume, 1990, p.19). Peers, as well as experts in the field, provided various viewpoints during seminars. This allowed student teachers to reflect upon their most pressing concerns and helped them judge the worth of their own values and belief systems.

Teacher educators and student teacher supervisors can move student teachers toward reflective teaching by modeling dialogic reflection in seminars and by being reflective practitioners themselves. The purpose of reflection " . . . is to enable us as teachers to step back and view our practice from a broader, more complete perspective than might be initially apparent in the multiple demands of a teaching moment, to ask and answer hard questions about what we do and don't do in a classroom, to consider alternate explanations and perspectives, and understand the larger social and moral issues imbedded with even the seemingly most trivial of classroom details" (McKenna, 1999, p.15). Rana reminds us that "Teaching requires continuous learning and adjustments. Experience will make it easier, but hopefully it will remain challenging. I know that my strength is my awareness of my weaknesses" (Journal entry, December, 1998). By systematically teaching student teachers to carefully and thoughtfully reflect on their daily practice, we as educators, are making a conscientious effort toward quality supervision and extending learning from college courses to the student teaching experiences.

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